Duncan McRae

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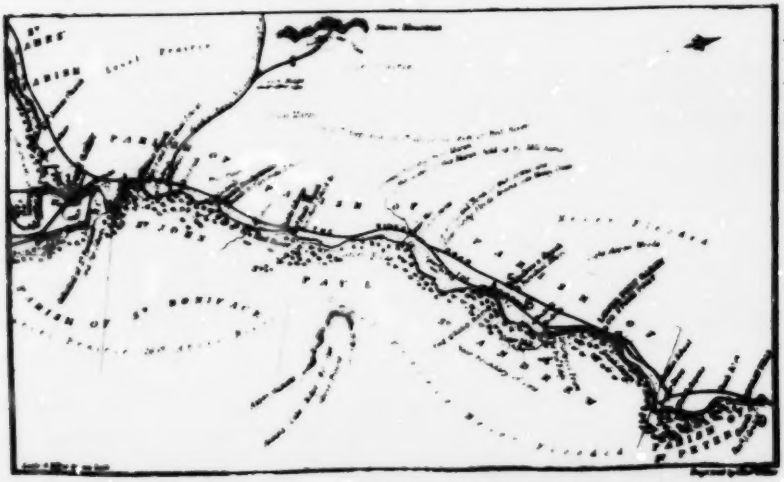
Duncan McRae

A boat trip down the winding course of the Red River might well be described as a scenic cruise through Manitoba's past. Along the river's banks north of Winnipeg are a number of stone buildings that were constructed over one hundred years ago, during the era of the Red River Settlement. These buildings are an important part of the province's heritage, and they stand as a lasting tribute to the stonemasons who were responsible for their construction. Prominent among these early masons was a man named Duncan McRae.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Map showing location of some of Duncan McRae's major undertakings: 1. Upper Fort Garry 2. St. John's Cathedral 3. Kildonan Church 4. "Twin Oaks" 5. St. Andrew's Church 6. Kennedy House 7. Lower Fort Garry 8. Dynevor 9. St. Peter's Church

A Contract with the Hudson's Bay Company

Duncan McRae was born at Melbost, in the parish of Stornoway in the Scottish Hebrides in 1813. Although little is known about his early life at Melbost, McRae did enter the service of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) as a stonemason in 1837. Under the terms of his contract with Messrs. William and Roderick Morrison, agents of the HBC, he was to work for five years at £28 per annum. On 21 June 1837, the day of Queen Victoria's coronation, Duncan McRae left Stornoway for the Red River Settlement.

Stone structures were a fairly uncommon sight in Red River at this time. Although the value of local limestone had been demonstrated as early as 1731, when the Hudson's Bay Company constructed Fort Prince of Wales

near present-day Churchill, the people at Red River had generally contented themselves with wooden houses. During the 1830s, however, as the settlement became increasingly important in the HBC's operations, the amount of construction in the area escalated and the number of stone buildings gradually increased.

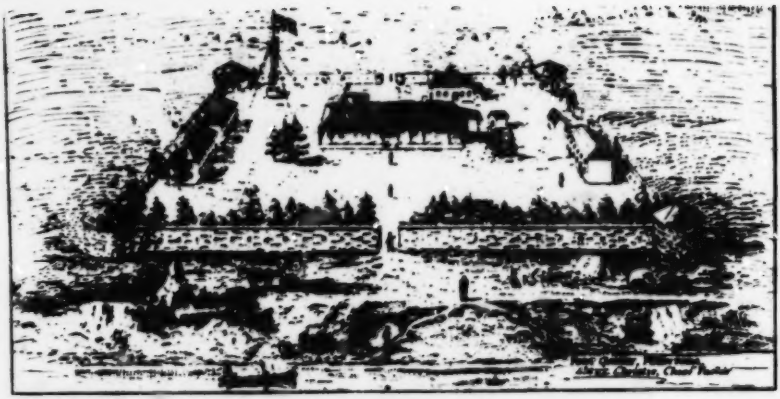
In 1829 Pierre Le Blanc, a French Canadian stonemason, was sent to Fort Garry by Governor George Simpson, and in 1830 he began work on a new stone fort about thirty-two kilometres downstream from the junction of the Red and the Assiniboine. This post was to be known as "Lower Fort Garry". The Company's original fort at the junction of the two rivers had been badly damaged in the flood of 1826 and Simpson decided to rebuild in a less vulnerable position. Unfortunately, trade was so well established at the original site, that the idea of moving the administrative centre was abandoned, and in 1836 work began on a stone building to replace the original wooden structure at the forks. Duncan McRae and another Scottish stonemason, John Clouston, did much of the fort's stone work,

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Fort Garry Gate, which still stands in the City of Winnipeg

and McRae has also been credited with the construction of the impressive stone gate that was added to the north wall of the fort in 1850.

By 1839, McRae and Clouston were also involved in the construction of a wall built to encircle Lower Fort Garry. The wall was a defensive barrier approximately one metre thick and two metres high, with a round tower at each corner and an embrasure every four and a half metres for small arms fire. McRae also helped to construct some of the stone buildings within the walls, including those which formed the fourth side of the quadrangle.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Lower Fort Garry

Duncan McRae's Work at Red River

Five years after he arrived at the settlement, Duncan McRae abandoned the life of a single man. On 10 November 1842, he married Charlotte Smith, whose father William was employed as a farm instructor with the HBC. The ceremony was performed at St. John's Church by the Reverend William Cockran, a man with whom McRae would later have many dealings.

The young couple settled on twenty hectares of land near Lower Fort Garry which Duncan had purchased from the HBC. Their log home was situated approximately two kilometres north of the lock of Lockport and was similar in design to other houses in the area. Its only unique feature was a handsome stone fireplace, presumably built by the stonemason himself.

The year 1842 also marked the expiry date of McRae's contract with the HBC. During 1843 he worked regularly for the company as a freeman and, over the next two decades, he continued to receive contracts from his former employers. As late as September 1870, he was hard at work laying the foundations for a new storehouse at Lower Fort Garry.

Once McRae's contract with the HBC expired, he was free to work as an independent. Over the next thirty years he undertook the construction of a number of churches and private dwellings at the Red River Settlement. One of his first independent commissions was for the construction of St. Andrew's Church on the west bank of the Red River, about thirty-two kilometres north of Fort Garry.

By 1844 the existing wooden church had become too small for the congregation, and the parish minister, Reverend William Cockran, decided to replace it with a stone building. Cockran supervised the construction, while McRae worked the limestone that was quarried on the river bank near the chosen site. The church, a simple rectangular structure with an attached tower, took five summers to complete.

Courtesy Parks Canada and William McRae

Charlotte McRae

Judging by the records of payment, most of McRae's work seems to have been done during the first three years.

During the construction, McRae and Cockran apparently argued about the length of the church; the mason felt that the building was too long for the human voice to carry clearly but Cockran disagreed. The minister proposed to settle the dispute by having McRae stand at the back of the church while he delivered a few words from the front. "Duncan McRae", the clergyman allegedly called out, "they tell me that you drink more rum than is good for you. In future, curb your bestial desires and try to live a sober, righteous and godly life." The mason heard every word the minister spoke and quickly reversed his position. "I've changed my mind," he said, "the church is nae long enough."

The construction of St. Andrew's also involved personal misfortune for McRae. At one point, the scaffolding upon which he was standing gave way, and he fell some twenty-one metres to the ground. The mason survived the mishap and continued to work at his craft, but could no longer do any heavy construction work.

McRae was also involved in the construction of St. Andrew's rectory. Built across from the church, it, too, replaced an earlier structure which had decayed beyond use. Begun in 1851, the rectory had been completed by late 1854.

In 1853 McRae began to help in the construction of another stone church for William Cockran. Located some twenty-four kilometres below St. Andrew's on the east bank of the Red River, the new church was built in the heart of Chief Peguis' Indian settlement. It was intended to replace the original wooden church which the Saulteaux and Swampy

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

St. Andrew's-on-the-Red

Cree congregation had outgrown. In the fall of 1852, eighty cords of stone were quarried by the Indian workmen and 1686 bushels of lime and an equal quantity of sand were hauled to the site. McRae spent the winter dressing the stone for St. Peter's church, and by late May of 1853, work on the one metre deep foundations was far enough advanced for Bishop David Anderson of Rupert's Land to lay the cornerstone.

Duncan McRae also helped to fulfill a promise made by Lord Selkirk to the original Scottish settlers of Red River. In 1852 he began work on the first Presbyterian church in the settlement at Frog Plain, approximately

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Kildonan Presbyterian Church

eight kilometres below Fort Garry. In 1852 Recorder Adam Thom laid the cornerstone, and in 1854 Kildonan Presbyterian Church was completed. When his work was done, McRae is reputed to have made a prediction: "there, keep pouther and ill hans off her an' she'll staun for a hunner years an' mair." The mason's prophecy held true; the church celebrated its centennial in 1954 and still stands proudly today.

In 1862, with the help of John Clouston, Duncan McRae constructed a church which became known as St. John's Anglican Cathedral. Located on the site of the Reverend John West's original wooden church, the new structure replaced a stone building constructed in 1833 which had been badly damaged in the flood of 1852. McRae also worked on Little Britain Presbyterian Church, situated on the west side of the Red near Lower Fort Garry. He considered Little Britain to be "his" church because he was a member of the congregation, and also sat on the church's Management Committee.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Little Britain Church, built 1874

Duncan McRae's independent masonry work was not confined to church construction. In 1857-58 he built "Twin Oaks", a Georgian-style mansion located on River Road near St. Andrew's, which was to serve as a young ladies' boarding school under headmistress Matilda Davis. He was also credited with the construction of "Dynevor", a rectory built for the Reverend Abraham Cowley across the river from St. Peter's Church in 1865. This building was later converted into the Dynevor Indian Hospital and is now part of St. John's Cathedral School for Boys. In 1866, McRae

worked on the residence of Arctic explorer Captain William Kennedy. Located on lot 63, River Road in the parish of St. Andrew's, this home now serves as the Red River House Museum.

Duncan McRae also constructed the Donald Murray House in Kildonan. This structure was both a tribute to his masonry talents and a site of historical significance in the development of higher education in the province. The first classes of Manitoba College were held there during the winter of 1871-72, while the college building was being constructed.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

"Twin Oaks", Miss Davis' Boarding School

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Dynevor Indian Hospital, formerly a rectory of Reverend Abraham Cowley, St. Peter's

Over the years, Duncan McRae's many construction projects often took him away from his home and farm near Lower Fort Garry. During the summer months, he and his labourers usually camped at the site where they worked and returned home on Saturday night to attend church and spend time with their families on Sunday. The McRae's had twelve children, eleven of whom survived into adulthood, and while their father was absent, they and their mother, Charlotte, worked the family farm. It was partially due to their efforts, that McRae was successfully able to ply his trade.

The long hours of heavy work eventually took their toll on the stonemason. During the last fifteen years of his life, Duncan McRae was an invalid, able to move only with great difficulty. He died on 4 February 1898 and was buried in the family plot at Little Britain Cemetery.

The buildings constructed by Duncan McRae were simple but functional and their most remarkable characteristic was their durability. "Twin Oaks", "Dynevor", Captain Kennedy's home, St. Andrews, St. Peter's, Kildonan and Little Britain Church have all stood the test of time, and serve as fine examples of early Red River architecture. They also stand as a lasting tribute to the talents of Duncan McRae.

Suggestions for Further Reading

References to the life and work of Duncan McFae can be found in a variety of sources. Documents available at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives provide a record of McRae's employment with the company and the "Architectural and Historical Survey", *Provincial Archives of Manitoba*, offers information on some of the buildings which he constructed. Articles published in the Winnipeg Free Press, 18 July 1908 and 6 June 1928 provide anecdotal information on McRae. For a more detailed examination of the history of specific buildings constructed in the area of Red River see: Gillian Moir et al., *Early Buildings of Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1973) and Jill Wade, *Red River Architecture* (Master's Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1967). The reader may also want to consult Margaret McBeth's, *The Story of Kildonan Presbyterian Church 1851-1951*, and *The Old Stone Church — The History of Little Britain United Church*, as well as two other pamphlets prepared by the Historic Resources Branch, *Kildonan Presbyterian Church* and *St. Peter's Church*.

Credits

The cover photograph is printed courtesy of Parks Canada and William McRae.

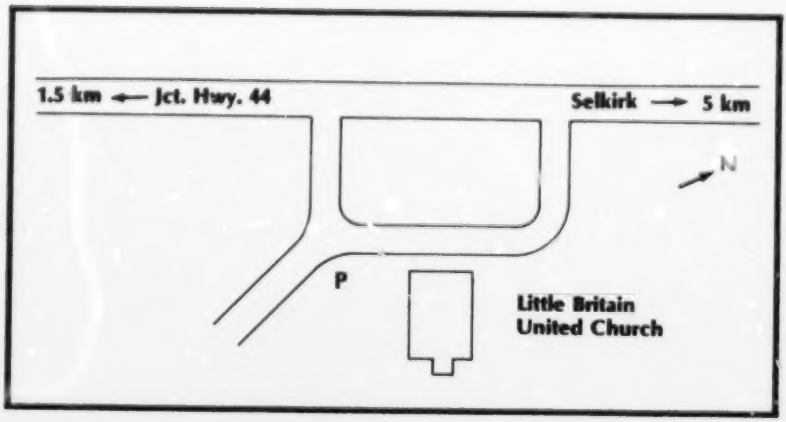
Duncan McRae 1813 - 1898

Born at Melbost, parish of Stornoway, in the Scottish Hebrides, Duncan McRae joined the Hudson's Bay Company as a stonemason in 1837 and worked for the company in the Red River Settlement for the next five years. He assisted with the construction of Lower Fort Garry and the rebuilding of Upper Fort Garry.

Later, McRae helped to build several stone churches along the Red River, landmarks which stand today as a tribute to his craft. These include St. Andrew's-on-the-Red, where McRae suffered a serious accident, Old Kildonan, Little Britain and St. Peter's Dynevor. He also helped to construct the rectories at St. Andrew's and Dynevor, and several other imposing private dwellings, such as "Twin Oaks", a Georgian style mansion which served as a boarding school for young ladies.

The pioneer stonemason is buried in his home parish of Little Britain.

The Historic Sites Advisory Board of Manitoba



This plaque is located on the grounds of Little Britain United Church, 5 kilometres south of Selkirk on Highway 9.